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## **Event as the Brand Ambassador of its Host City: Analyzing the Social Media Exposure of Split Generated by Ultra Europe Music Festival**

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*Events have become an important part of tourist destination branding. They attract domestic and international visitors, and generate media exposure for the city. In that sense, music festivals can be seen as the brand ambassadors of their host cities which represent novelty in the implementation of this concept. Brand ambassadors are usually persons, but for the purpose of this research, one of the biggest electronic, dance, and house music festivals in the world, the Ultra Europe is considered to be the brand ambassador of the city of Split, its host city. The research determines the nature and extent of social media exposure generated for Split by hosting the Ultra Europe music festival. The coverage of the festival on social media was content analyzed for any verbal and written mentions of Split and its associated images. Four different types of social media platforms were examined; Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter and, YouTube. The research shows that the Ultra Europe is very important ambassador of Split branding, and that Split and its associated images has been mentioned and displayed more than 800 times. Due to the festival, Split gained huge media exposure and increase number of tourist arrivals.*

*Keywords: Brand ambassador, event, social media, Split, Ultra Europe.*

### **Introduction**

The industry of events and festivals has started developing from the beginning of the 1990s (Derrett, 2008; Gibson & Connell, 2012), while today events represent an essential part of the urban life, having generally very diversified themes, such as music festivals, fairs, exhibitions, shows, political events, cultural activities, sport events, religious meetings, etc. (Dimanche, 2002: 74; Popescu & Corbos, 2012: 19). To summarize, events can be anything that is planned by

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a destination to attract and satisfy customers, and that is out of the ordinary (Dimanche, 2002: 73).

As one type of events, the festivals has expanded and specialised more than any other segment of the special event industry (Gibson & Connell, 2012). The number of urban festivals has risen sharply in the last two decades (Gursoy, Kim & Uysal, 2004), and they are more popular than ever, attracting millions of fans (Schwartz, 2013). What makes festivals distinct is that they are usually held annually and generally have social and cultural, rather than economic or political aims: getting people together for fun, entertainment and a shared sense of camaraderie (Burke, 2004; Gibson & Connell, 2012; Popescu & Corbos, 2012: 19). Many festivals take place in summer, when the holidays normally trigger an influx of tourists. Festivals can play a prominent role in attracting these tourists and inducing them to spend money in the local economy (Tohmo, 2005: 432; Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011: 197). Also, they act like “glue”, temporarily sticking together various stakeholders (Richards & Wilson, 2004: 1931), economic transactions and networks (Gibson & Connell, 2012).

Studies of city marketing and tourism have pointed to the increasing use of events and festivals as a means to market places and major cities in particular (Robertson & Guerrier, 1998; Schuster, 2001). Cities actively compete for festivals because they are convinced in importance of a festival for their city (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011). By organizing a festival, a city distinguishes itself from other cities as a tourist destination (Schuster, 1995; Saayman & Saayman, 2006; Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011). As well improves its image (Dimanche, 2002: 73; Haslam, 2009; Liu, 2015; Popescu & Corbos, 2012: 19; Richards & Wilson, 2004: 1931), enhance its brand (Dimanche, 2002: 73; Hankinson, 2004; Liu, 2015: 147), stimulates urban development (Richards & Wilson, 2004: 1931), attracts visitors (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011) and investments (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011; Richards & Wilson, 2004: 1931). In that sense, event can be seen as the brand ambassador of its host city, representing a city brand in a positive light and by doing so helps city to increase its awareness, media exposure, and sales.

Although cities using event-led initiatives to regenerate, reposition and rebrand themselves have been well-documented (Bamber, Maheshwari & Vandewalle, 2009), there is a lack of empirical research in the field of media impact of events (Green, Costa & Fitzgerald, 2003: 336), event-based city branding (Liu, 2015: 148), and event brand ambassadors. The concept of event brand ambassador was first introduced by Barisic and Prebezac (2016), and represents the novelty in marketing literature. From this point of view, world famous electronic, dance and house music festival, Ultra Europe is considered to be the brand ambassador of its host city Split, the second largest city in Croatia, and important tourist destination.

Based on that statement, and previous work of Barisic and Prebezac (2016), and Green, Costa and Fitzgerald (2003) this study shows that two elements of exposure through event social media are important from the standpoint of cities that seek to market themselves through events brand ambassadors. First, it is

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necessary to know how often the host city is shown, mentioned, or represented. Second, what was shown or mentioned, and how it represents the city. In that sense, study analysis the nature and extent of social media exposure generated for Split by hosting the Ultra Europe music festival.

Based on the above literature review, the following research questions guided the analysis:

1. Is the Ultra Europe ambassador of Split brand?
2. How extensive is the exposure of Split on social media platforms through Ultra Europe?
3. What kinds of city mentions and city images occur on social media platforms through Ultra Europe?

## **Theoretical Background**

### *The City Branding Through Event Brand Ambassadors*

The concept of brand ambassador classically refers to a person who is included in prints, or in videos, and the presence of whom is expected to support the promotion of a product, service, destination or company. Traditionally, the word “brand/destination ambassador” is associated to a famous person who, though her official function or because she is paid for that, promotes a brand (Diesbach, 2012: 229) in a positive light to their network and by doing so helps to increase brand awareness and sales. For companies, a brand ambassador is usually an employee of that organization (de Chernatony, Cottam & Segal-Horn, 2006; Xiong, King & Piehler, 2013), while for destination internal stakeholders, particularly citizens, have been recognized as an important asset of places for the delivery of a brand consistent message (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2010; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013: 31). As Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2010) note, residents play a fourfold role in place branding.

Besides them, events are widely seen as an effective enhancer of city branding (Derrett, 2004; Liu, 2015: 150; Dimanche, 2002: 73; Hankinson, 2004; Liu, 2015: 147; Richards & Palmer, 2010). They have the potential to enhance the city brand equity in a number of ways, including brand association (i.e. linking the city to the event image), city awareness (Dimanche, 2002: 78; Green, Costa & Fitzgerald, 2003: 335), perceived quality, brand loyalty (i.e. stimulating repeat visits and making people loyal to the city) and city positioning (Hankinson, 2004). As described by Chalip, Green and Hill (2003), event-based city branding is an exercise of co-branding between the event and the city. Richards and Palmer (2010) argued that events and a city’s brand do not exist in isolation. They work together to differentiate the city from other competitors in the marketplace (Liu, 2015: 150), striving to strengthen the city’s brand.

Increasing competition between cities in a crowded field of images is one of the major factors stimulating cities to adopt such branding strategies, or even

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'hard branding' (Evans, 2003) that seeks to transform fixed cultural capital into competitive advantage through the staging of cultural events. Some major events have arguably become brands in their own right, such as the Cannes Film Festival (Richards & Wilson, 2004: 1932) or Exit festival. Haslam (2009) for example, comments that music festivals offer potential as vehicles for branding cities, towns and villages, as they can enhance a destination's image and identity, improving perceptions of the place and the people that live there. Festivals that have a long-established association with cities sometimes become a vehicle for expressing the close relationship between identity and place (Quinn, 2005: 928–9). Over time, the festival and the host destination can become inextricably linked (Getz, 2008). In that sense, events can be seen as the brand ambassadors of their host cities.

*Social Media Coverage of the Event*

The media coverage of the event emerged as a crucial agent that plays a huge role in the formation of brand perceptions (Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2016). Many researchers argue that the intensive media coverage before and during the event increases the awareness of the event as well its host city (Getz, 1997). This media attention puts the event and its host city in the spotlight (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011: 197). For a long time, the traditional media were the only marketing tool for brand communication, and the main source of information (Luo & Zhong, 2015, 275; Sjöberg, 2010), but during the past decade media space has undergone immeasurable transformation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) in favour of social over traditional media. Generally speaking, social media is gradually replacing the traditional media (Bruhn, Schoenmuller & Schafer, 2012: 770) and becoming the most powerful mass medium of our time. Speaking to that, 29% of world global population are active users of social media (We Are Social, 2015: 6-7). There are various social media platforms where event can be presents. Just few examples are Facebook, which is the one of the most popular social network (Indrupati i Henari, 2012: 48; Kušić, 2010: 105) in the world. YouTube which is the video sharing shite, and the second most visited website in the world (Ranking.com, 2014). Wikipedia, the most prominent example of wikis, and Twitter, the famous micro blogging site.

The literature on the use of social media by festival organizers is quite limited (Hudson *et al.*, 2015: 70). But it has been suggested that a positive music festival experience combined with proactive social networking could help festival brands build long-term relationships with music fans (Intel, 2013), as well attracts first time visitors to discover destination. Then, destination has the opportunity to satisfy those visitors and to lure them into repeat visits (Dimanche, 2002: 79). Also, social media represents effective tool by which event organizers can at cheap and efficient way promote event, increase its image, and communicate with potential visitors.

*Split as the Host City of Ultra Europe Music Festival*

Split is the second largest city in Croatia, and the administrative centre of the Split and Dalmatia County. It lies on the Adriatic coast, central Dalmatia. According to the latest census conducted in 2011 Split has almost 180 thousand inhabitants. The story of Split is already 17 centuries old, dating to the time the Roman Emperor Diocletian decided to build his Palace right on the peninsula near the Roman city Salona. During these 1700 years the Palace turned into a city, which to this day lures with its rich tradition, and beauty of natural and cultural heritage. Diocletian Palace and the entire historical core of Split have been on the World Heritage UNESCO since 1979 (Tourist Board of Split, 2016). Today, Split is an important tourist destination which attracts 460.000 tourists per year. The city's most famous landmarks beside Diocletian Palace are Poljud stadium, the Riva, Matejuška port and Marjan hill.

Among 16 European countries, Croatia and Split particularly gain the organization of first Ultra Europe festival in July 2013. Ultra Europe is the European edition of the Ultra Music Festival, one of the biggest electronic, dance and house music festivals in the world. The festival was organized in the cooperation of Ultra World and Adriam MM Produkcija. At this first year of Ultra Europe, there were more than 60 performers including some of the world most popular names of electronic music such as Carl Cox, Knife Party, a Chuckiea, Afrojack, Armin van Buuren etc. That year festival visited more than 100,000 visitors from 75 countries. In 2014, and 2015 festival gained even more attention. In 2015, festival visited 150,000 people from 45 countries which were 15% more than in 2014. Due to Ultra, the number of tourist arrivals and nights spent in Split during July increased by 21%, and visitors spent in the city 66,7 million Euros (Dalmacija News, 2015).

## **Methodology**

A survey method was content analysis. Content analysis is the multipurpose research method in which the content of communication serves as the basis of inference (Holsti, 1969: 597). It examines data for patterns and structures, singles out the key features to which researchers want to pay attention, develops categories, and aggregates them into perceptible constructs in order to seize meaning (Gray & Densten, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Based on the research proposed by Green, Costa and Fitzgerald (2003) the author developed the lists of coding categories, precisely, the lists of types of verbal and written mentions and visual images of Split appearing on social media platforms. Coding matrices were developed for each analysis, visual and verbal/written. Specific social media platforms were listed down the left side of the matrix, and each occurrence was listed along the top. In the next phase the author conducted the coding. Each social media platform has been coded twice. First, the platforms were coded for the number and type of verbal and written mentions of Split and

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Split related words like Poljud Stadium. In the second analysis, coder recorded the type of Split related images (i.e. what was shown).

Data were gathered from four different types of social media platforms. More accurate, from official profiles of Ultra Europe on Facebook (<https://web.facebook.com/UltraEurope/?fref=ts>), and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/ultraeurope>). As well from article by the name Ultra Europe on Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultra\\_Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultra_Europe)), and official promotional videos of Ultra Europe posted on YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=ultra+europe](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=ultra+europe)). At all four platforms, both user generated and firm generated content has been analysed (text, photo, and video). The data were gathered for period of 12 months, namely from 10 June, 2015 to 10 June, 2016.

## **Results**

Results are reported in two sections. The first section focuses on verbal and written mentions of Split on four social media platforms, while the second examines actual images of Split. Each section reports both the nature (type) and extent (quantity) of the mentions or images of Split and its associate images on social media platforms.

### *Verbal and Written Mentions of Split*

The majority of mentions were for the city itself. Split was directly written and mentioned more than 490 times, following by Poljud stadium, and Diocletian palace. All three analysed categories were mentioned the most times on Facebook. The reason for that lie in the fact that Facebook profile of Ultra Europe contains huge amount of user posts, and user generated content. Precisely, the users are those who mentioned Split and Poljud stadium in the majority of cases. Split was mentioned in the context of host city, as well as the beautiful tourist destination from the Ultra Europe itself, as well from the users. On the other hand, Poljud stadium was mentioned as the festival venue both from Ultra Europe, and users.

During the analysed period the Split, and Poljud stadium were written 123 times on Twitter. Since profile of Ultra Europe on Twitter contains almost exclusively firm generated content, the majority of those appearances were part of the promotional ads for the Ultra Europe festival itself. Although the least mentions of Split and Poljud appear on Wikipedia it can't be neglected as the platform of influence, since Split and Poljud appear in the first screen shot of this site.

At the YouTube, Split, Poljud, and Diocletian palace were verbally mentioned as part of the promotional Ultra Europe videos, while written mentions were for the city itself in form of user comments on those videos. The total number of verbal and written mentions of Split and its associated images is nearly 580 (Table 1).

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**Table 1.** *Verbal or Written Mentions*

<b>Social media platform</b>	<b>Split</b>	<b>Poljud stadium</b>	<b>Diocletian palace</b>	<b>Total</b>
Facebook	363	57	0	420
Twitter	100	23	0	123
Wikipedia	5	1	0	6
YouTube	25	4	1	30
Total	493	85	1	579

*Visual Imagery of Split*

Split imagery appeared for a total of 241 times during the examined period. Three distinct Split images appear; the cityscape, Poljud stadium, and Diocletian palace which are all strongly and distinctively associated with Split. The cityscape appeared 27 times. Majority of these were daily images showing the beauty of city and its atmosphere posted by Ultra Europe. The Poljud stadium was shown almost 200 times, since it represents the festival venue. One third of those images are captured from the air, showing the whole stadium, and the rest are images of stadium during the preparation for the concerts, or from the concerts itself. Diocletian palace is the symbol of Split long history, and it was shown 17 times. The images of Diocletian palace are integral part of all official Ultra Europe promotional videos posted at the YouTube.

The majority of visual images were displayed on Facebook, while Twitter and YouTube also contain substantial number of images. Further, there was only one image of Poljud stadium on Wikipedia, considering that Wikipedia almost exclusively includes text data (Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Visual Images of Split*

<b>Social media platform</b>	<b>City-scape</b>	<b>Poljud stadium</b>	<b>Diocletian palace</b>	<b>Total</b>
Facebook	15	114	6	135
Twitter	5	55	0	60
Wikipedia	0	1	0	1
YouTube	7	27	11	45
Total	27	197	17	241

**Discussion**

The most important, but not surprising finding of this research is that Ultra Europe is the strong brand ambassador of its host city Split, which supports the proposal that events could be seen as the brand ambassadors of their host destinations. This finding is displayed in the great number of appearances of Split and its related images Poljud stadium and Diocletian palace on social media through Ultra Europe. As well, in the contexts in which Split was mentioned, written or shown. The Ultra Europe promotes itself as music event which occurs exclusively in Split, Poljud stadium and that is displayed at every

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promotional ad and video of Ultra Europe. The Split gained great social media exposure by Ultra Europe, and it was not mentioned only as the festival venue, but also as the tourist destination worth of visiting. In other words, city was shown as a distinctive entity, and not merely as an indistinguishable urban backdrop to the event itself (Green, Costa & Fitzgerald, 2003).

What is also important is that Ultra Europe represents a brand of Split in a positive light, and by doing so helps to increase city awareness and attracts domestic, and more important international visitors. Usually, domestic visitors are familiar with tourist destinations which are located within their country, but international visitors among thousands various destinations first need to be aware of that particular destination. This is the first condition which must be fulfilled that destination even will be taken into consideration set. That the Split was not just taken into the consideration set, but also visited regarding the Ultra, states the 21% of increase in tourist arrivals and nights spent during July (Dalmacija News, 2015).

Further, Ultra Europe provides credible, trustworthy promotion and visibility of Split to current and potential visitors who use social media as the source of information. Also enhance the Split brand equity (Hankinson, 2004) by linking the Split to the image (Quinn, 2005: 928–9) and quality of the event. Over those three years of organizing festival in Croatia, Split and Ultra Europe become inextricably linked (Getz, 2008), which confirms that destinations could be branded by festivals (Derrett, 2004) as well the overall value of event brand ambassadors for their host destinations.

## **Conclusion**

Cities use brand ambassador for numerous reasons, some of the most common are media exposure of the city, to strengthen their brands and increase in their image as a tourist destination. Media exposure is crucial in visibility of the city, as well as in attracting visitors. Enabling primary international visibility of a host city on social media through brand ambassador, is the main importance of this paper. Most often, destinations use people for their brand ambassadors, but in this research was introduced the new concept; event brand ambassador, representing the scientific contribution of this paper. In that sense one of the world leading electronic, dance and house music festival, Ultra Europe is the brand ambassador of Split, its host city.

For the purpose of study, data was gathered from the official profiles and pages of Ultra Europe on four different social media platforms (Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and content analysed. The analysis showed that Split and its associated images, Poljud stadium and Diocletian palace were written and mentioned 579 times, leading with Facebook as social media platform with the most appearances. On the other hand, Split imagery i.e. its city- scape, along with Poljud stadium and Diocletian palace appeared 241 times at the observed platforms. Among three distinct images, the Poljud stadium represent



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the leading image. The data show even greater exposure of Split on social media platforms though Ultra Europe than was expected. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the particular event is important and strong ambassador of Split brand, which confirms the overall value of events as a tool for destination marketing, and profiling in the global tourist map (Bercic *et al.*, 2010; Goeldner, 2006).

### **Research Limitations and Managerial Implications**

The biggest limitation of this research is the lack of theoretical background on event brand ambassadors since this concept does not exist in previous literature. As well, it is based on four different types of social media platforms which all have different structure, norms, and various type of content dominates on each of them which all complicates their comparison. So for example, further research can analyse data gathered just from one social media platform, or compare just one type of content at all four platforms.

The tested framework provides marketers of tourist destination further insight into how effectively manage brand ambassadors, which can provide added value to destination brand, and take it to the next level. When destination chooses its brand ambassador it is important that the ambassador is emotionally engaged with destination brand promise, and it espouses the brand value which destination promises to deliver their tourist. If destination manages to positively engage brand ambassador with its brand, that could be destination's greatest marketing communications tool in overall promotion. This could have significant implications on the design of the brand and branding campaign and affect whether the destination can be effectively marketed (Liu, 2015: 159). Also, dissemination of promotional message through social media via brand ambassadors could be cost effective, but on the other hand very efficient way of targeting audience.

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